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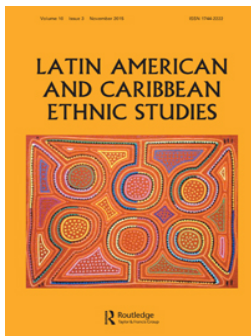
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## 'Those Stones Speak:' Black-Activist Engagement with Slavery Archaeology in Rio de Janeiro

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# 'THOSE STONES SPEAK:' BLACK-ACTIVIST ENGAGEMENT WITH SLAVERY ARCHAEOLOGY IN RIO DE JANEIRO

André Cicalo

*This article explores the recent process of engagement by black activists with the archaeological heritage of slavery in the port region of Rio de Janeiro. Black Brazilian social movements have made little political reference to collective memory of enslavement in the past. A change has occurred over recent years in Rio de Janeiro with the archaeological discovery of a slave trade wharf in a landfilled area of the port. As a result of this finding, black activists have started ascribing political importance to Afro-Brazilians' difficult past, promoting its materialization in the city's memorial landscape. Not yet explored analytically by other scholars, I suggest that this new approach among activists reflects deep changes in the socio-political scenario within and outside Brazil.*

**Keywords:** Slavery archaeology; heritage policies; Brazil's black movements; multiculturalism; Atlantic diaspora

## Introduction

In early 2011, the port region of Rio de Janeiro was in chaos as a result of the urban regeneration works that would prepare the city for the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. Amidst these works, during excavations for the installation of a modern sewage and water pipeline system, the remains of old docks came to the surface. Archaeological experts identified part of the site as Valongo Wharf, considered to be the main disembarkation point of African enslaved people in the Americas during the Atlantic slave trade (Lima, de Souza, and Sene 2014, 107). The area around the site received enslaved people from Africa since at least the second half of the 18th century, becoming the heart of proper slavery infrastructure that included slave markets and burial sites.<sup>1</sup> Considering this historical legacy, archaeology and history experts demanded the conservation of the site (Inteligência Empresarial 2011). Alongside the well-preserved structure of Valongo Wharf, a number of objects were also found. Among these objects, experts identified artifacts relating to African faiths, tobacco pipes (*cachimbos*), and jewelry, which they linked to the everyday lives of enslaved Africans and their descendants in Brazil (Lima, André Torres de Souza, and Sene 2014, 108–131). In spite of the technical complications that archaeological

preservation implied for the process of urban regeneration in the harbor area, the mayor of Rio de Janeiro responded promptly to the experts' appeal, revising his plans for pipeline and road works in the area (Inteligencia Empresarial 2011). Following the mayor's dispositions very shortly after the archaeological recognition, the city council's Sub-secretary for Heritage Affairs presented an architectonic project for the memorialization of the site (Daflon 2011).

During the process of recognition, the archaeologist director of the excavations, Professor Tania Andrade Lima, made contact with black movement activists as she expected that the site would have a deep impact on activist struggles for racial equality (Cicalo 2013, 175). Activists' reactions were not as immediate as Lima had expected. However, about two weeks after the findings, black activists and community leaders mobilized, claiming participation in the process of memorialization by signing a document known as the Valongo Charter (Carta do Valongo) (ANF 2011). The Valongo Charter was endorsed by activists jointly with researchers from Rio de Janeiro's universities and the Instituto Pretos Novos (New Blacks Institute), a memory center created after the discovery of the New Blacks (Pretos Novos) slave burial ground in 1996 in an area close by.<sup>2</sup> As a result of this mobilization, the city council, researchers, and black movements have discussed the creation of a Circuit of African Heritage whose main attraction will be the slavery archaeological sites of Valongo Wharf and Pretos Novos, with the municipal decree 34803/2011. Since 2012, black activists have also collaborated with the city council to prepare the candidature of Valongo Wharf for listing as a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site. Valongo Wharf, in the meantime, is gradually becoming a venue for institutional events that commemorate the slave past, under the leadership of candomblé<sup>3</sup> priestesses and black militants.

The construction of slavery heritage in the port area of Rio de Janeiro is an ongoing and multisided phenomenon, which involves a number of interests and different actors such as black activists, archaeologists, governors, and UNESCO bureaucrats (Cicalo 2013). This article aims to reconstruct this process, focusing on black activism. A source of inspiration for this work is the understanding that activist engagement with slavery archaeology is a very new phenomenon in Brazil. Brazilian black politics, in fact, have traditionally engaged with anti-slavery narratives of maroon resistance, while Valongo and other slavery archaeology sites are more immediately evocative of slave suffering. The recent shift in activist narratives, I propose, is the result of changes in race relations and politics, both at the national and transnational levels, in which black activists have been both influenced and influencing actors.

In the first part of the article, I comment upon the historical lack of involvement of black militants in the archaeology of the African and Afro-descendant experience in Brazil. Establishing a comparison with the United States, where black-activist engagement with Afro-American archaeology has traditionally been more substantive than in Brazil, I stress how this different approach has been influenced by different systems of race relations and politics in these two geographical contexts. In the second part of the article, I deal with the process of involvement of Brazilian activists with slavery archaeology since the excavations of Valongo Wharf in 2011, a process that I have been able to follow through fieldwork until the time of writing. I

discuss the fact that, although the archaeological findings at Valongo represent an important triggering factor for activist involvement in slavery archaeology in Rio de Janeiro, the general framework for this involvement follows a longer process of black racial affirmation in Brazil and abroad, and its gradual institutionalization in state politics. In the third part of the article, I discuss the black-activist approach to archeological sites in the Valongo region in relation to the potentially disempowering nature of material representations that evoke slave suffering (Araujo 2014; Santos 2005). I observe that the display and use of narratives of slave suffering in the port area of Rio de Janeiro are being generally reconciled within black-activist mainstream discourse in a way that is not seen as victimizing but, in contrast, as useful for black empowerment.

An important clarification for this article concerns the notion of black mobilization. In Brazil, the expression ‘black movement’ in the single form is conventional yet inaccurate, due to the fragmentation of black politics into a wide range of actors with different interests (Santos and Ferreira 2013). However, general orientations do tend to prevail within black collective action at certain times. An example of this is the widespread support that black social movements gave to the introduction of black affirmative action and other racial equality policy measures in Brazil in the 2000s (Cicalo 2012). The kind of black activism that I focus on in this article reflects the pool of governmentally established bodies that were created between 1988 and the early 2000s for the institutionalization of black politics and their inclusion within Brazil’s state politics (Telles 2004, 49–74). The governmental origin and nature of these bodies does not necessarily imply that they enjoy much power within local and federal governments; however, they receive public funding, occupy governmental buildings and, in most cases, change their directives in accordance with political changes in governmental administrations. Although these bodies cannot be assumed to be fully representative of Rio de Janeiro’s black mobilization on a larger scale, their influence on the evolving trends of black collective action in Brazil is quite substantial. In fact, these bodies represent the institutionalized and official channel for the voice of black civil society before local, state, and federal governments. More concretely, this sector of black political action represents the main, if not the only, black-activist interlocutors at high levels of the government in the process of the creation of slavery heritage in the port area of Rio de Janeiro.

Part of the data for this article was collected through interviews with black-activist leaders, chosen from among the presidents and ex-presidents of government-established bodies that defend the interests of the black population in Brazil and in Rio de Janeiro, such as the Palmares Foundation, SEPPIR (Secretary’s Office for the Politics for the Promotion of Racial Equality), CEDINE (Committee for Black People’s Rights in the State of Rio de Janeiro), COMDEDINE (Municipal Committee for the Defense of Black People’s Rights for the city of Rio de Janeiro) and CEPPIR (Special Coordination for the Promotion of Racial Equality Politics in the city of Rio de Janeiro), whose roles I will explain below. Other data were gathered by following, ethnographically and via the media, the events and the black-activist discourses involved in the creation of public slavery heritage in the port area of Rio de Janeiro.

### **Brazilian Black Activists and Archaeology of the Black Past: A Historical and Comparative Perspective**

Over the last decades, the trend towards socially and politically engaged archaeology has grown exponentially, trying to redress the colonialist and Eurocentric legacy that the discipline has traditionally embodied (Orser 1996; Smith 2004). According to this new logic, archaeology can be useful to ‘investigate the remains of past people who had been forced into subordinate social positions, and who left few, if any, written records that they authored themselves about their lives’ (Singleton and Torres de Souza 2009, 450). It can also be useful to support the political and identity claims of vulnerable communities in the present, and to question the unequal power relations that have historically affected them (Little and Shackel 2007; Nicholas 2006; Nicholas and Hollowell 2007; Smith 2004). This approach has not developed in a historical and social vacuum. Singleton and Torres de Souza (2009, 450), for example, have observed how the US Civil Rights movement, Black Consciousness, Black Studies, New Social History, and Women’s Movements have greatly influenced the growth of archaeology that deals with the history of Afro-descendant communities. In addition, in Latin America this trend has developed alongside, and in synergy with, the spread of cultural identity politics of indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, and the flourishing of decolonial and postcolonial thought in academia (Gnecco and Ayala 2011).

In the Americas outside Brazil, archaeology that specifically focuses on the experience of enslaved African populations and African-descended communities has developed more substantially in Cuba and in the United States (Singleton and de Souza 2009), where research has particularly addressed sites that implicitly recall slavery suffering and subordination, such as plantations, slave quarters, and burial grounds. Further examples can be found in some Caribbean countries such as Jamaica, Barbados, and the Dominican Republic (Delle, Hauser, and Armstrong 2011; Orser 1998; Posnanski 1984). However, only in the USA can a relatively well-established black-activist engagement with African-American and slavery archaeology be found. This phenomenon has been highly influenced by the anti-exclusion and anti-racist political struggles that developed more effectively in the second half of the 20th century, and has typically relied on a relatively significant presence of politically engaged black professionals (Singleton and de Souza 2009). Black subjectivity in Afro-American archaeology, as LaRoche and Blakey (1997, 93) argue, is crucial because it aims to revert the simultaneous processes of invisibilization and misrepresentation that white researchers have made of African-American experience within historical archaeology (LaRoche and Blakey 1997; Perry and Blakey 1999; Singleton 1995).

Nowadays, the objective of expressing black subjectivity in African-American archaeology is powerfully embodied by the presence of the US Society of Black Archaeologists, whose goals transversally deal with matters of black representation.<sup>4</sup> The presence of black academics in archaeology has grown, together with the involvement of the black community in actions that concern African-American archaeological sites. Perhaps the most representative example of this process in the United States is a case that dates back to the early 1990s in New York, when a slave

and African-American burial ground surfaced during the construction of a federal building in Manhattan in 1991. Skeletal remains were removed to allow for the building works to continue while a private company was hired for the scientific study of the findings. On that occasion, black and community activists mobilized *en masse* not only to stop the originally planned works (Blakey 1998, 54), but also to incorporate black professionals in the scientific and cultural interpretation of the material retrieved. In the end, black-activist mobilization resulted in the construction of a monument, the African Burial Ground memorial. They also achieved the reburial of the skeletal remains that had been removed from the site, and managed to significantly reduce the size of the area destined for the federal building. In this sense, the process of the creation of the African Burial Ground in Manhattan has been presented as an example of African-American empowerment (LaRoche and Blakey 1997; Perry and Blakey 1999).

In Brazil, more or less at the same time, a case similar to that in Manhattan had a different impact on black-activist mobilization. In 1996, the slave burial ground of Pretos Novos was found during floor renovation works in a private house in the port area of Rio de Janeiro (Pereira Medeiros 2007, 2013), university researchers expressed an interest in pursuing research into the site, and the city council promised support. Bone fragments belonging to 28 individuals were eventually transferred for study to the IAB (Brazilian Archaeological Institute), where they are still stored today for research purposes. In 2001, the international seminar 'Cotas da Escravidão' (Quotas of Slavery) and an exhibition on the archaeological findings of Pretos Novos was held at the City General Archives of Rio de Janeiro (AGCRJ), calling for further research into slavery archaeology in the port region. A municipal decree (24088/2004) was also created for the commemoration of slavery and African heritage, though this legislation was never implemented. The research material and media coverage produced for the 2001 international seminar does not make any reference to the participation of black activists in the seminar activities, nor even about any black-activist political stance in relation to the archaeological findings (Arquivo da Cidade 2001). With the failed implementation of decree 24088/2004, Pretos Novos fell into a new period of institutional forgetting for over two decades, as no concrete official actions for its rescue were undertaken. This happened in spite of the mobilization of the white owners of the area of the site, who managed to establish a memorial and a research institute, the Pretos Novos Institute (IPN). From the time of my first visits in 2008, the owners of the site mentioned the lack of interest that both public authorities and the black community had shown in the burial ground. Only in 2011, with the finding of Valongo Wharf and the inter-institutional mobilization that began around its memorialization, did the black movements begin to engage more visibly with the site of Pretos Novos.

The delayed involvement of the black movements in slavery archaeological sites in Rio de Janeiro, both in and before 2011, can be explored in light of the particular history of Brazil's system of race relations, particularly in comparison to the different scenario existing in the United States. While in the United States a tradition of institutionalized racial polarization and segregation has been a strong factor in black consciousness and politics, Brazil has built shared national identity and pride



on the ideological paradigm of ‘racial democracy,’ an idea that was supported by sociologist Gilberto Freyre since the 1930s (Andrews 2004; Guimarães 1999; Nobles 2000; Skidmore 1974). Emphasizing racial and cultural mixture, the idea of ‘racial democracy’ has been institutionally used to explain why racial divisions have little or no impact on social inequalities in Brazil, particularly in the time between the first rule of Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945) and the end of the military dictatorship (1964–1985). The implementation of ‘racial democracy’ as state ideology, as Nobles (2000, 111) mentions, was realized while curbing the equality claims made by black movements in Brazil, as these were seen as having a subversive impact on the principles of racial harmony.

In the 1950s, academic studies started to show that Brazilian social inequalities had a clearly racialized component (Costa-Pinto [1953] 1998; Nogueira [1954] 1985). Alongside these studies, the debate around decolonization in Africa, and the process of re-democratization in Brazil from the mid-1970s influenced a strong resurgence of the Brazilian black movement (Hanchard 1994; Larkin 1981). In 1978, amidst the phase of political re-democratization in Brazil, the newly formed Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU) built on black activism that had been gradually emerging in previous decades. Criticizing the ideology of ‘racial democracy’ as a white strategy to downplay racial consciousness, MNU placed much emphasis on the cultural links between Afro-Brazilian culture and Africa (Hanchard 1994), even though scholars such as Guimarães (2005, 163) suggest that Brazilian black movements were also influenced by the legacy of ‘racial democracy.’ A special focus in activist discourse was on the historical experience of Brazilian maroon settlements (*quilombos*), which were seen as embodying both the agency of Africans against enslavement and the cultural resistance of a ‘pure’ African way of living in Brazil (do Nascimento 1982). In 1988, with the return to democracy in Brazil and the creation of the new Constitution, Brazilian black movements influenced the introduction of a transitory clause that recognized territorial rights to rural communities descending from quilombos (Arruti 1997; French 2009). In the same era, commemorative monuments dedicated to Zumbi of Palmares, the most prominent historical maroon leader in Brazil, started appearing in several Brazilian cities (Araujo 2014). Finally, the late 1980s represented a phase of institutionalization of black politics, particularly with the creation of the Palmares Foundation, a section of the Ministry of Culture that promotes Afro-Brazilian culture (Telles 2004, 49), and COMDEDINE.

The development of the archaeology of the African diaspora in Brazil was influenced by the process of political democratization in Brazil in the 1980s, along with the wave of African-American archaeology that developed in the United States (Singleton and de Souza 2009). At that time, archaeological studies in Brazil involved, more or less simultaneously, plantations, slave quarters, and areas previously occupied by maroon settlements. However, the first studies on African and Afro-descendant sites in Brazil in the 1980s echoed ideas of cultural and racial mixture that, in Brazil, have strongly supported the ideology of racial democracy. In fact, they tended to highlight the cultural interaction between people of European, Amerindian and African descent, particularly through the analysis of pottery (Singleton and de Souza 2009, 452). Only in the 1990s did studies on these sites start looking at the ethnic



specificity of the enslaved and self-emancipated populations (Singleton and de Souza 2009). This process in Brazil, unlike in the United States, occurred in spite of the substantial absence of black and black-activist researchers in the archaeological excavations. As COMDEEDINE's President, Ms. Dulce Vasconcellos, has observed,

part of our delayed engagement with slavery archaeology should be ascribed to the fact that black people did not know about Valongo. Activists had not, and still do not have substantive training in archaeology ... In fact, the history of the black people until now has been substantially written by non-black people.

(Personal communication, 23 September 2013)

Vasconcellos' statement alludes to the problem of the low access non-whites have to higher education in Brazil. According to figures published by the Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the percentage of non-whites with a university degree in Brazil in 1997 was just 2.2 per cent, compared to 9.6 per cent of whites (Cicalo 2012, 3). Similarly, the percentage of non-white (*pardos* and *pretos*) university teachers in Brazil was still less than 1 per cent in 2005 (Carvalho 2005). Acknowledging the relevance of the education factor does not mean that no individual activists were acquainted with the story of Valongo Wharf and Pretos Novos burial ground. It suggests, quite differently, that some possible historical knowledge about these sites among black activists in Rio de Janeiro had not fostered political mobilization, and that part of this could be ascribed to the extremely low numbers of black academics (and, more specifically, black archaeologists) and the reduced circulation of academic knowledge about slavery among black civil society.

While limited diffusion of knowledge was certainly a relevant preclusive condition for black-activist engagement with slavery archaeology, Vasconcellos mentioned additional possible reasons, one of which particularly caught my attention. According to Vasconcellos, 'there was a time when black people did not even want to hear about slavery.' Her point is indirectly, yet strikingly supported by the lack of evidence of an open political engagement of black activists with the collective memory of enslavement in classic literature on black mobilization in Brazil (Alberti and Pereira Araújo 2007; Covin 1990; Hanchard 1994; Pereira Araújo 2007). In quite a different direction, an activist interviewed by Pereira Araújo (2010, 225) argued that

although in some black communities the story of slavery was common heritage, some [slave-descendant] people tried to silence its memory because it must have been a very traumatic and violent experience.

The same point is supported by more recent blog declarations of the MNU concerning the finding of Valongo in 2011. MNU activists, in fact, have declared that

it is important that the city preserves very well the places that have remained so invisible because of *our own* difficulty in looking at the past with sincerity and reflexivity ... Shutting *our* eyes is more convenient; however, it is better to admit, understand, and overcome.

(MNU 2011; emphasis added)

What is interesting in this statement is not only the clear will to engage with the traumatic history of slavery but the declaration of the fact that 'trauma,' and not

simply 'lack of knowledge,' have contributed to earlier difficulties in engaging. This context of collective silence and forgetting resonates with the study by Michael Pollak (1989) in relation to 'underground memories' among survivors of the Holocaust. Pollak describes how these survivors selectively excise parts of their pasts that evoke trauma and that affect their self-esteem, calling into question how much of the process of forgetting is conscious and how much is unconscious. Other scholars such as Wiseman and Barber (2008) and Scharf (2007), in this sense, have discussed how the Holocaust has affected second and third generation descendants of victims. Such a conceptual framing may explain why slave descendants and particularly black activists were so preoccupied with celebrating Africa, Afro-Brazilian culture, and maroon resistance in previous decades, and much less interested in researching and remembering anything that could evoke slave suffering.

Poor education and traumatic memories, while certainly relevant, are not the only reasons that my interviewees offered to explain the historical obstacles for black-activist engagement with slavery archaeology. Most interviewees also stated that for a long time slavery archaeology could not have been a priority for militants because they were too busy fighting for more basic and general priorities, such as democratization, the institutionalization of black politics at the governmental level, the struggle for the implementation of black affirmative action in Brazil, and the introduction of compulsory teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture in school curricula.

In keeping with the scenario presented, the first and only recorded case of black-activist engagement with the archaeology of Africans and Afro-descendants in Brazil before 2011 dates back to the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> At that time, the Palmares Foundation supported, including financially, the archaeological search for the Quilombo of Palmares, carried out by Orser and Funari (2004) and Allen (1998, 2006) in the mountainous region of Serra da Barriga in northeastern Brazil. This is a kind of archaeology that Orser and Funari (2004, 12) have labeled the 'archaeology of rebellion and resistance.' Although the settlement of Palmares has never been found, this place has maintained great symbolic value for the construction of black identity in Brazil: being the center of the kingdom of Zumbi, Palmares successfully resisted the Portuguese army throughout the 17th century. What activists looked for archaeologically in Palmares, according to Allen (1998), was the idea of African purity as a symbol of cultural resistance. Allen (2006, 86), in fact, notes that activists of the Palmares Foundation boycotted his excavations in Palmares until 1997 because his preliminary findings on the study of pottery found at the site showed cultural mixture between black, indigenous, and European communities (and their descendants) in the area. Having said this, there is no evidence that, from the early 1990s until the late 2000s, black militants equally supported slavery archaeology in places such as plantations and slave burial sites, which more directly evoke sorrowful aspects of African and Afro-descendant experience in Brazil.<sup>6</sup> This discourse can be extended to Salvador de Bahia, which is considered the heart of Brazilian Africanness and black activism (Alberto 2011; Romo 2010; Teles dos Santos 2005, 61), and which, because of this, has been the object of copious research into African and African-derived heritage (Araujo 2014; Capone 2010; Pinho 2004). In fact, no scholarly works or

media show a record of black-activist engagement with slavery archaeology with regard to slave quarters, plantations, and burial grounds in the region of Salvador de Bahia. Such reading accords with the fact that the Pelourinho (Pillory) of Salvador, despite its name, is now a tourist showcase of Afro-Brazilian culture and provides little critical representation of slave life (Araujo 2010, 413; Pinho 2004, 34–35).

### **‘Those Stones Speak.’ Recent Developments of Black-Activist Engagement with Slavery Archaeology in Rio de Janeiro**

On 20 November 2013, the Day of Black Consciousness in Brazil, black movement leaders, UNESCO bureaucrats, and city council authorities organized a tour of commemorative events at Valongo Wharf and Pretos Novos burial site. The events were used as an opportunity to reconfirm national and international interest in the sites and to stress the importance of launching Valongo Wharf as a candidate for UNESCO World Heritage status. Visibly moved, COMDEDINE’s president, Ms. Dulce Vasconcellos, described Valongo Wharf and Pretos Novos as ‘very special places where black people can feel the energy of martyred ancestors, understand their past, and make sense of themselves’ (public speech at the Pretos Novos Institute on 20 November 2013). The president of CEPPIR, the city council body for the implementation of racial equality policies, Lelette Coutto, barely holding back her tears in front of an institutionally diverse audience, added that the archaeological sites of Rio de Janeiro’s port area ‘foster an identity that is not simply cultural but is also political.’ In fact, as she recalled, ‘the sadness that these spaces evoke can make us reflect on the racism that still affects black people today.’ Commenting on Valongo Wharf, Eloi Ferreira Araújo, a former President of the Palmares Foundation used similar words. According to him,

the wharf has crucial importance because it is something tangible, which unequivocally proves that enslaved African people did arrive here, dying or dead. Those stones speak, they convey the suffering that enslaved men and women experienced when disembarking from the slave ships, stepping on those stones on their way to the slave markets.

(Personal communication, 17 September 2013)

These testimonies suggest that the excavation of Valongo Wharf and the public debate that has built around the site have come to reflect a turning point in black-activist discourse around archaeological sites and slavery memory, placing great emphasis on the traumatic historical beginning of Africans’ and African-descendants’ experiences in Brazil.

While militant declarations in the present suggest a positive engagement with the material heritage of slavery, this does not mean that these discourses are simply produced by the process of the archaeological excavation of Valongo Wharf in the framework of urban regeneration works. More broadly, such discourses are an effect of the complex scenario of black affirmation for which black activists have been active agents at the national and transnational levels (Fleming and Morris 2015). This process has occurred in a dialogic political exchange with the Brazilian government, which is gradually unsettling (at least at a public discursive level) the myth of racial

democracy, and addressing racial equality with policies of reparation. The decade of the 2000s, importantly, saw the introduction of state policies that have shaped a new political culture around differential rights in favor of the black Brazilian population. Examples of these measures include the implementation of affirmative action policies to enhance the presence of 'black' (*negro*) students in public universities; law 10639/2003, which prescribes the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture in Brazilian schools in order to modify their overwhelmingly Eurocentric curricula; and the Statute of Racial Equality, sanctioned in 2010, which sets a legal framework for federal legislation in Brazil in terms of racial equality (Cicalo 2012). The content of these laws, alongside activist struggles and negotiations to make black-affirmative measures effective, have created a solid ground for the development of mainstream black-activist political discourse. The process I describe occurred alongside the government expansion of bodies for the promotion of black community rights in Brazil. The 2000s, more precisely, saw the creation of the SEPPPIR, which has become the highest body for the promotion of Afro-Brazilian rights at the level of the federal government. Similarly, for the State of Rio de Janeiro, black political entities such as CEDINE and the State Sub-Secretariat for Racial Equality (SUPIR) have been governmentally established to support the public administration and its articulation with black civil society. At city council level, the CEPPIR was also created. These bodies have come to complement the work of the Palmares Foundation and COMDEDINE, already established in the late 1980s in the context of Brazil's democratization process.

It is also worth noting that in the early 2000s, an important specification clarified the vague character of the term 'quilombo,' as used in the legislation of Article 68 of the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 (Mattos and Abreu 2013). Article 2 of the decree 4887/2003 now defines quilombos not simply as a space of resistance; it defines these settlements as those self-identified ethno-racial groups whose specific relationship to a traditional territory and ancestral culture is linked to *resistance* to '*the historical oppression suffered*' (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup> This legal clarification has the power of combining traditional accounts of glorious maroon resistance with experiences of suffering and victimhood. Memory of oppression, in fact, has not only remained alive in popular culture with some slavery legacy such as samba, jongo music, and the carnival, but is also still vivid in the oral history of black rural communities (Rios and Mattos 2005, 105–171). Once the Constitution of 1988 opened up rights for quilombos, these communities started to strategically enhance collective memory of slavery as 'precious currency' for territorial claiming (French 2009; Mattos and Abreu 2013, 109–110).

An additional factor that explains the recent engagement of black activists with the archaeological site of Valongo Wharf is the growing awareness among black activists about international programs concerning the memorialization of slave trade sites, and particularly UNESCO's Slave Route Project. Founded in 1994, the Slave Route Project has the aim of preserving material and immaterial slavery heritage, and gives continuity to scattered initiatives that were already being promoted in Benin, Ghana, and Senegal (Araujo 2014). These initiatives have emphasized 'victimhood,' by establishing a dialogue with the experience of Holocaust memorialization sites such as

Dachau, Buchenwald, Auschwitz, and Drancy (Araujo 2014, 10). The Slave Route Project began to exert a transnational influence on Brazilian black activists only in the early 2000s, during the administration of former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, at a time when Brazil had recommenced promoting its economic and geopolitical interests in Africa (Cicalo 2014). Brazil's political missions in Africa, in fact, included diplomatic visits to sites of slavery memory in Senegal, Ghana, and Benin, which became a way to strengthen Brazil-Africa relations on the basis of their intersecting historical legacy (Cicalo 2014, 25). The activist Eloi Ferreira Araújo, who, as an SEPPIR minister in 2010, accompanied Brazil's former President Lula da Silva on his mission to Africa, declared that the visit to the slavery site of Gorée Island in Senegal 'had moved him immensely' (personal communication, 17 September 2013). The participation of Brazil in the Slave Route Project remained in any case marginal until 2010, when Brazil started working actively on its inventory of sites of slavery memory, receiving some pressure from UNESCO to this end. By chance, the excavations of Valongo Wharf coincided with the production of this national inventory, of which Valongo has become the flagship (Geledes 2014). As a consequence of the archaeological unearthing of Valongo, UNESCO's Slave Route Project organized an international seminar that was held in Brasília in August 2012, and which involved the Palmares Foundation as a main partner. It was in that particular context that Eloi Ferreira Araújo (who was the President of the Palmares Foundation at that time) officially stated his appreciation of the directive of the Slave Route Project for supporting the importance of launching Valongo Wharf as a World Heritage site (Ferreira Araújo 2012). To maintain this momentum, the following meeting of the International Scientific Committee of the Slave Route Project was held in Rio de Janeiro in November 2013, involving leaders of black social movements, representatives from UNESCO, the highest levels of city council authorities, and a significant number of (white) researchers. This meeting led to UNESCO's commemorative events at Valongo, mentioned at the start of this section of the article.

The combination of these factors can be used to explain the evolving scenario that is making Valongo's stones 'speak,' and to whose constitution black activists have contributed over the last four decades. It should be acknowledged, however, that the material conditions enabling Valongo's stones 'to speak' were set in place more concretely by the intervention of archaeological experts sensitive to slavery memory, and whose social engagement with issues of equality has grown over the last four decades under the globalizing effect of equality struggles. Professor Tania Lima, the archaeologist-in-chief for the excavations at Valongo, has presented herself as a part of academia that struggles against 'social amnesia' (Inteligencia Empresarial 2011, 17), making the effort to involve the black community in the excavations and asking support from candomblé priestesses to identify and interpret the religious artifacts found at the site (Candida 2014). Lima extensively mentioned the influence that African-American archaeology had played on her practice of the discipline, its importance in producing more knowledge about the black past, and the possibility of putting this material at the service of Brazil's black movements (personal communication, 24 April 2012). This kind of socially and community-engaged archaeology in Brazil certainly has the limitation of counting among its numbers few (if any) black

researchers. However, its conceptual engagement with equality struggles is also an effect of the transnational and national context of racial empowerment that black activists, including Brazilian black activists, have contributed to shaping.<sup>8</sup>

### **Memories of Slave Suffering between Victimization and Empowerment: Towards a Unifying Discourse**

Brazilian social scientist Myrian Santos (2005, 60) has criticized the mainstream approach that Brazilian museums have applied to the memory of slavery for ranging from a lack of representation and invisibility, to an emphasis on slavery abolition as an act of mercy from white elites, to demeaning representations of the enslaved as 'victims' who are not active subjects of their own history. In fact, the mainstream iconography of the enslaved in Brazil, both in museums and in schoolbooks, has disproportionately insisted on images of half-naked, chained, and tortured people, often at a whipping post, as portrayed by renowned painters of Brazilian colonial life Jean-Baptiste Debret and Johann Moritz Rugendas (Araujo 2014, 129–131; Oliva 2003; Oriá 1996). Echoing Santos, social historian Araujo (2014, 132–141) criticizes how some Brazilian museums have also engaged in displaying slavery torture tools, such as in the Museum Júlio de Castilho in Rio Grande do Sul, or sculptures that reproduce scenes from the whipping post, such as in the Museum of the Slave (Museu do Escravo) in Belo-Vale, in the State of Minas Gerais. Araujo contends that by objectifying the enslaved and depriving them of agency, museums have typically placed little emphasis on the everyday lives and culture of the enslaved, while no space is given to narratives of slavery resistance. The structure of these representations, Araujo suggests, is an effect of a colonialist approach to heritage whose main preoccupation has been glorifying the history of white elites (2014, 8). Only since the 1980s has a new concept emerged with the creation of Afro-Brazilian museums influenced by black activism, firstly in Salvador de Bahia and more recently in São Paulo (Araujo 2014; Santos 2005, 57), in addition to the recent experiences of digital/virtual Afro-Brazilian museums in several Brazilian states (Roza 2014). These spaces have eventually privileged African and Afro-Brazilian culture and art, ways of living, and narratives of resistance. I have observed, in contrast, that very little or no emphasis is given to slave suffering in these newly established museums, except for the physical representation of a slave ship in the Afro-Brazil Museum in Sao Paulo, the emotional impact of which, nonetheless, is diluted within the larger context of the Afro-Brazilian art and material culture exhibited.

While the new trend among Afro-Brazilian museums downplays the material heritage of slavery in order to highlight resistance and empowerment, the Circuit of African Heritage in the port area of Rio de Janeiro takes a different approach: its central idea, in fact, is clearly constructed around a slave wharf and a burial site, whose structure and use recalls a mass grave rather than a proper cemetery (Pereira Medeiros 2007, 2013). For the construction of this commemorative space, the representatives of governmental spheres of black activism have started to rely quite widely on discourses of suffering and trauma, which had seemed to be of little political use until very recently, but which they now consider to be useful for black politics and identity building.



This new shift in Rio de Janeiro does not suggest that all activists have been enthusiastic about the slavery trauma evoked by the port area's archaeological sites. Some black movement activists from the non-governmental organization (NGO) sector, particularly, believe that the Circuit of African Heritage should privilege much more the positive aspects of African culture and black resistance as the main heritage approach in the area. It should be noted that narratives of resistance are certainly included in the Circuit but, as it is presently conceived, do not reflect its most immediate character. Further disagreement has concerned the possibility of creating a museum of Afro-Brazilian experience in the area around Valongo Wharf, with doubts particularly about the question of whether this space should focus on slavery (following the examples of slavery museums in London and Liverpool) or whether it should instead emphasize African contributions to Brazil (Cicalo 2015, 198–199). In the meantime, in April 2013, Brazil's Minister of Culture, Marta Suplicy, declared that Brasilia would soon have its National Afro-Brazilian Museum (Canuto 2015). Although the planning for a project of a museum of African diaspora has not yet taken off in Rio de Janeiro, and the location for its possible realization is still to be decided, further misgivings have concerned the possibility of physically displaying a slave ship (as is the case in the Afro-Brazilian Museum of São Paulo), whose representation would cause sorrow and may seem disempowering. In addition, some controversy has also concerned the planned aesthetics for the burial site of Pretos Novos as a museum space. During the meetings to discuss the planning of Circuit of African Heritage in 2012, activists, city council heritage managers, candomblé priestesses, and researchers discussed whether skeletal remains should be displayed to visitors, while some people argued that this might be disrespectful to the deceased and traumatizing for visitors.<sup>9</sup>

Diverging views about slavery archaeological heritage within black activism in Rio de Janeiro have been largely reconciled by the relatively homogenous approach embraced by governmentally established bodies of black politics. These actors tend to combine the narrative of resistance with one that highlights collective reflection on past wrongs and the tourist promotion of this memory, as is also the mainstream approach of the majority of Holocaust Museums and UNESCO's sites of slavery memory (Araujo 2014). Concerns about showing skeletal remains at Pretos Novos were eventually cleared by high-ranking candomblé leaders who intervened to solve the problem from a spiritual perspective. Priestess Mãe Edelzuita do Oxoguian, who is one of the most renowned candomblé spiritual leaders in Rio and a figure politically linked to COMDEDINE and to MNU, stated that

slavery archaeology sites [in the port of Rio de Janeiro] tell the history of the African people and the cruelty they had to face ... In doing so, these sites prevent similar tragedies from occurring again in the future...<sup>10</sup>

Interviews with Eloi Ferreira Araújo (a former president of the Palmares Foundation), Dulce Vasconcellos (COMDEDINE), and Lelette Coutto (CEPPIR) similarly highlighted that all aspects of the black past should be revealed to the black community. The opposite risk, according to these leaders, is to reduce representations of Afro-Brazilians to the folkloric and joyful aspects of its culture. In fact, as Ferreira stressed,



we do not see representations of people dancing and singing in Holocaust and Apartheid museums. Slaves arrived here naked or half-naked, malnourished, exhausted after a long journey. There was no party ... Censoring this fact would be naive and a way of distorting history. Instead of being scared of the past, we should look for all the dimensions of Afro-Brazilian history to be remembered.

(Personal communication, 17 September 2013)

The importance for these activists of stressing trauma, however, is not conceived as a practice in and of itself, but is combined with narratives of agency and resistance. In fact, as CEDINE's former president Paulo Roberto dos Santos argues,

in spite of evoking a tragic past, slavery archaeological sites remind us that black people have managed to resist and are still here ... Engaging with places of slavery suffering will be a formative experience for new black generations, teaching them that new battles can be undertaken and won.

(Personal communication, 5 September 2013)

By fostering closeness to local and federal government, the institutionalization of black politics has represented a motivating factor for a new approach to slavery heritage to emerge among activists. This closeness, in fact, has increased activist exposure to globalized approaches to heritage, of which UNESCO's Slave Route Project represents a crucial example. The political and religious leaders mentioned in this article were all involved, as audience or speakers, in the Slave Route Project's International Seminar held in Brasilia in August 2012. On that occasion, black militants were socialized about UNESCO's agenda with regard to slavery memory sites, their links with discourses of human rights, and their potential for promoting the tourism of memory. This fact does not necessarily imply that the spirit of material memory of slavery promoted by UNESCO in Brazil will reproduce what has already taken place in West Africa. While in West African countries slavery heritage promotes tourism without clearly addressing slave descendants (Araujo 2014, 2), its impact in Latin America is open to political appropriation from black identity movements. This is a consequence of the overall difference between race relations in the Americas and in West Africa.

A question concerns whether present memorial configurations of slavery heritage in the port of Rio de Janeiro and possible further emphasis on slavery suffering recall the already largely criticized representations of slavery suffering in Brazilian museums (Araujo 2014; Santos 2005). In June 2014, a city council-funded theater performance that simulated scenes of slave selling at Valongo Wharf disturbed some black activists with whom I was attending. These people complained about the fact that the play's director was white. They stated that a black (activist) director would have been more appropriate, as this would confer political content to the script. This made me reflect that criticism of the victimizing impact of certain slavery representations has more to do with the agents and their racialized position within Brazilian society, and less to do with the aesthetics of the representation itself. The victimizing and demeaning images that Santos (2005) and Araujo (2014) criticize in some Brazilian museums are condemned above all for lacking engagement with black-activist subjectivity. In fact, they are the result of a victimizing approach that is vertically imposed by

white elites, at a time (1930s-1980s) when the ideology of racial democracy was flourishing in Brazil. The process that is occurring around the creation of a Circuit of African Heritage in the port of Rio de Janeiro, in contrast, implies some degree of black participation at a time in which social movements, researchers, and governments, at least discursively, are working to demolish the myth of racial democracy.

What is clear is that, for the first time, black Brazilian movements are joining a debate about the archaeology and material heritage of slavery. It should be considered that this process is also occurring at a time when significant public debate is taking place in Brazil around the creation of the National Truth Commission (Comissão Nacional da Verdade), which was instituted by law 12528/2011, to investigate human rights violations in Brazil between 1946 and 1988 (with a special focus on the torture of civilians at the time of Brazil's military dictatorship), and whose final reports were eventually submitted to President Dilma Rousseff in December 2014 (*O Globo*, 10 December 2014). It is also taking place at a time when Caribbean countries have started making formal claims against European ex-colonial powers for economic and social 'reparations' for slavery, while ideas of slavery reparations in favor of Afro-descendants are emerging in other Latin America region such as Colombia (Mosquera and Barcelos 2007). In 2013, CARICOM (Caribbean Community and Common Market), a Caribbean organization that focuses on matters of regional integration, sought compensation from Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands for what is said to be the lingering legacy of the Atlantic slave trade, while a similar law has recently begun to be developed for proposal in Brazil (Economist 2013; Reparations 2015). This shows how slavery memory is increasingly intersecting with transnational discourses of reparations. Very recent news, to conclude, is that Brazil has eventually established a National Commission Truth for 'Black Slavery,' which has started operating in Brasilia in February 2015 (OAB 2015). Such reparation claims are largely justified by the suffering that Africans and Afro-descendants had to face under slavery, and by the socioeconomic vulnerability that slavery has left as a legacy to Afro-descendant communities. In light of this context, narratives of slavery suffering aiming to access reparations might find a larger space within black-activist discourse in the future.

A question that remains open is whether black-activist engagement with slavery archaeological heritage will come together with increased numbers of black archaeologists and heritage professionals, and whether policies of affirmative action will suffice to increase their numbers. At the moment, black communities have taken a step forward in joining the debate about the Afro-Brazilian past. This debate, however, is still disproportionally governed by experts and city council administrators, who cluster around the white pole of Brazil's color spectrum.

## Conclusion

This article was inspired by two main facts: on the one hand, the recent engagement of black activists with archaeological remains of the slave trade in the port area of Rio de Janeiro; and on the other hand, the scarce evidence of earlier black-activist interest in the material heritage of enslavement in Brazil. I suggest that Valongo Wharf has

come to represent one of the many expressions of a new phase of mainstream black activism, in which space has finally been made for a political appropriation of slavery memory. The mainstream discourse that black activists embrace is that due to the exclusion of Afro-Brazilians from quality education, 'others,' namely (white) Brazilian elites, have narrated black people's past in ways that have reproduced white hegemony. As I suggest, however, political silence about the memory of enslavement has also been actively deployed within black movements for long time, due to ascribing a potentially disempowering content to this past.

The slave past has become a political tool for black activists only at an historical moment in which a complex set of international and national conditions have given the chance for the memory of slavery to become useful for social claims. The emergence of this new context has not occurred abruptly as an effect of Valongo's excavations; it has also been produced by the convergence of diverse processes that have emerged more and more clearly over the last three decades, particularly with the advent of democratization and the gradual institutionalization of black politics in Brazil. While black movements have not yet produced an official reflection on the presence of a changed approach to the memory of slavery in Brazil, further studies in this field can contribute to understanding black mobilization in Brazil and its relations with the state by focusing on slavery memorialization politics. Historical research, for example, could explore more extensively how collective memory of enslavement has been negotiated and silenced by activists in Brazil over the last century in light of the ideological hegemony of the paradigm of racial democracy. Social research, on the other hand, could follow how the political appropriation of slavery memory by black social movements will evolve in the future and to what extent it will really satisfy broad claims for black socioeconomic inclusion in Brazil.

In political terms, activist engagement with slave suffering at Valongo Wharf is essentially focused on making sense of a diasporic past, appropriating the memory of enslavement for identity politics that have already achieved some institutional recognition in Brazil. From this angle, Valongo Wharf is much more than a space to commemorate a difficult past; it is also a space where certain black activists celebrate the increased inclusion of black politics within the nation, while continuing to challenge racial inequality in the present. To establish continuity between the contemporary 'black' appropriations of Valongo and the historical development of black mobilization in Brazil, a descriptive panel at the memorial site now states that the archaeological rescue of the wharf responded to 'a longstanding claim from the black movement.' In the end, no matter how much the memory of enslavement appealed to activists in the past and how much this subject has been intellectually accessible to the black masses, slavery archaeology is now presented clearly as something that Afro-Brazilians have always longed for.

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## Notes

- [1] According to Lima, de Souza, and Sene (2014, 107), Valongo Wharf received about half a million people between 1811 and 1831, when the Atlantic slave trade was formally banned in Brazil. In 1843, the site was replaced with the more elegant and modern Empress Wharf (whose remains were also found in the excavations), built to receive in grand style the future Empress Tereza Cristina of Bourbon in Brazil. The area was then transformed again over the following decades, and eventually landfilled in the republican period, around 1910 (Cicalo 2013; Vassallo 2013).
- [2] The expression 'New Blacks' refers to enslaved Africans who died more or less upon arrival, before being sold at the slave markets (Pereira Medeiros 2007).
- [3] An African-derived faith that venerates *orishás*, African gods.
- [4] See <http://www.societyofblackarchaeologists.com> (accessed 15 November 2014).
- [5] This approach reflected activists' stronger interest in maroon narratives of resistance that, according to Araujo (2014, 12), were also influenced by the process of the creation of Caribbean countries 'whose new national identities were closely connected to the image of freedom fighters' reacted against the traditional victimizing imagery of enslaved people.
- [6] Reference to slavery suffering is present in the work of Abdias Do Nascimento (1982), but is clearly downplayed in his emphasis on 'resistance' and '*quilombismo*' (maroon power).
- [7] See <http://presrepublica.jusbrasil.com.br/legislacao/98186/decreto-4887-03> (accessed 23 December 2014).
- [8] For comparison with a context different from the United States, see Shepherd's (2007) article on burial site excavations in a gentrifying area of Cape Town. Shepherd shows how the social processes that developed between several social actors around archaeological excavations in Cape Town intersect strongly with the current racial politics in post-apartheid South Africa.
- [9] Discussions of this sort, I observe, are not necessarily particular to Brazil as they also characterized black-activist discussions around the creation of the African Burial Ground in Manhattan. In New York, while most members of the black community endorsed the idea of building a memorial (LaRoche and Blakey 1997), some others believed that no physical building should be constructed on the site. See also <http://archive.archaeology.org/online/features/afbrburial/> (accessed 14 February 2015).
- [10] Trabalhos do Grupo Curatorial da Herança Africana, 4 May 2012, p. 5. Internal document. Unpublished.

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